



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Montenegro by Dusan Makavejev
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stereotype of Diane Keaton. The familiar mannerisms dissolve by the end, revealing a Keaton we have rarely, if ever, seen before. In the scene at the train station to which *Reds'* entire final half drives, Keaton's face displays a series of emotions markedly beyond the range of the young girl from the provinces who first arrived in New York. Anxious beyond measure when Reed does not at first emerge from the train, stony-faced at the appearance of a blanketed corpse, Bryant at last turns to see Reed at a distance looking toward her. She at first assumes the old sardonic look and swaggers toward him (a distinctive Keaton swagger), only to give that pose up almost instantly. The sardonic look which she dons and discards in an instant sums up, as a synecdoche, all the posturing she had previously used to defend her autonomy. But she no longer needs to defend it; she has earned it.

In both its virtues and its shortcomings, *Reds* resembles the kind of realist novel Lukacs called for as a means of critical resistance to the fragmentation of modernism, a realism in which the individual is represented as a social creature for whom the bourgeois world has not hardened into alienated otherness. It is an old-fashioned model, to which Brecht objected stringently, and from which both he and Eisenstein departed with powerfully radical aesthetic results. *Reds* is by no means radical in these terms; perhaps if it were more so, it might have found the means to explain Louise Bryant's transformation cinematically. But *Reds* does reveal some of the merits of the Lukacsian model. Beyond the coy charms of the husband cooking dinner and the dog popping out of his box under the Christmas tree emerges a vision of Reed and Bryant not only as real people, real historical actors, but as people who

thought of themselves that way. They move from Portland to New York to Provincetown to Russia as if Jefferson's claim that the earth belongs to the living were an accepted, even a practical, fact. They live lives of a kind that are almost unimaginable to us today, lives in which political convictions stimulate direct, even occasionally effective, action. Even when that action proves misdirected, as it does for Reed upon his return to Russia, the political convictions he shares with Bryant remain in force. They remain in force because they are shared.

—CAROLYN PORTER

MONTENEGRO

Director: Dusan Makavejev. Script: Makavejev. Photography: Tomsislav Pinter. Producer: Bo Jonsson. Music: Kornell Kovach.

Makavejev's new feature has been receiving suspiciously enthusiastic reviews. Can the director who outraged practically everybody in 1974 with his *Sweet Movie* have managed to make an ingratiating and modestly popular film?

Gone are the elegant political-psychological ironies of *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (which I take to be Makavejev's most important film) and so are the painful, mostly scatological excesses of *Sweet Movie*. And although the opening of *Montenegro* intercuts shots of apes lounging in a zoo with shots of its human characters, this does not lead to the kind of persistent collaging of several layers of reality which, in Makavejev's earlier films, made his outrageousness work so tellingly. Here, at least at first sight, we have a realist (though satiric) film with a twist ending. Yet even when he's trying to be "good" and win a Western audience, Makavejev can't help wonderful moments of craziness.

The film, a Swedish co-production, is set in Stockholm. Marilyn (Susan Anspach) is coupled with Martin (Erland Josephsson) in your ordinary tortured Swedish marriage. Josephsson is as hateful as ever: the quintessence of anti-Reichian man, wanly dead in his emotions, rigid in body and spirit, supercilious in his contacts with others, devoted only to ever-increasing international sales of flawless ballbearings. Anspach, playing his American wife, is more appealing. (Makavejev's films, like Bergman's, have usually centered on women; his men tend to be illustrative "problems" though in the final analysis the real problem

MONTENEGRO:
 "The fruit
 is
 poisoned"
 (or is it?)



—the mystery—lies within the women.) Marilyn leads a repressed bourgeois life, but at least she's interested in sex, and a certain intriguing madness lurks around her edges from the beginning; we gather it has always been difficult for *her* to be good, and now it becomes impossible. She cracks, like the egg we see her cracking for a schnitzel. . . .

The story mainly concerns what happens after Martin insincerely invites her along on a business trip; abandoning the children (who are creepy little parodies of the parents) she heads for the airport to follow him. There fate, in the form of Swedish customs agents, tosses her into the company of a lanky, emotional Yugoslav immigrant non-worker named Alex and the bumpkin Yugoslav girl he has come to pick up. Marilyn's life is never again the same. (It is characteristic of Makavejev that the stolid customs agents can't resist burning up some liquor they confiscate.)

Makavejev has always been centrally interested—he *is* a Reichian—in the oppositions between psycho-physiological realities and social constraints, and particularly in the pathologies (a source of a rather savage kind of comedy) which are generated by such tensions. The flash of his style comes, I think, from his attempt to embody in film these tensions and their ways of breaking out. Anspach is a little too soft for Makavejev's basic strategy to work at its best here; she doesn't quite bring off the irrational impulsiveness that the story requires. When she sets fire to the marital bedquilt in revenge for Josephsson's spurning of her advances, we don't quite feel it fits. And when, at the end, she evidently murders the man named Montenegro with whom she has just made love, we react to it as a Makavejev con-

ceit rather than a shocking yet somehow inevitable psychological reality.

But the characters are never the dominant motivating force in a Makavejev film, and the polarity between repressed, decorous Swedish life and the bumptious life of the Yugoslav immigrant community is the source of most of *Montenegro's* energy; there is a great deal of richness and surprise to it. Where the outlaw community in *Sweet Movie* rode a barge bearing the giant face of Karl Marx on its prow, here the immigrants have created their own little anarchist enclave amid the junkyards of Swedish society. Their bootlegger's Club Zanzibar, fabricated of scrap materials, is hospitable to rather irregular sexual relationships. Here the sight of a man with a large knife driven through his forehead (he cheated his brother at cards) is only mildly alarming. And here the gawky Yugoslav flowers into a bizarrely accomplished stripteaser, doing a number with a radio-controlled toy tank whose cannon has been transformed into a phallus—the blatancy of the device being charmingly offset by the lavishness of Makavejev's shooting and cutting of this set-piece scene.

Makavejev's is a world in which the irrational constantly and comically peeps through the stony facade of so-called civilization; he is the messenger of the ultimately unsuppressible id. Even the senile grandfather is not too senile to advertise for a wife (and get plenty of candidates), and he's sly enough to filch the family pistol, and batty enough to fire it at the ceiling when he thinks the psychiatrist is there to examine him, not Marilyn. Practically *all* the characters, however, display substantial aberrations. The psychiatrist (powerfully played by Per Oscarsson) is a ghoulish figure who de-

mands payment in advance since, as his receptionist puts it, "he's only interested in money." Martin chronically and dementedly keeps protesting that it's his wife who has the problems. It is only the Yugoslavs—whose lives allow the free expression of emotion—who don't have these bizarre tics.

After the shiny impersonal surfaces of bourgeois Sweden, the funky Club Zanzibar seems like home for the heart. The Yugoslavs inhabit the backside of industrial civilization, and in this enclave protected from "normalcy" everything from lamb-stealing to lesbian sex seems offhandedly natural. But Makavejev is no sentimentalist. After giving Marilyn a lethal-looking drink, Alex and a rough bunch of Yugoslavs bellow out a song of longing for the blonde goddess who has unaccountably appeared among them—whereupon two of them go outside and try to kill each other over her, in a battle with coal shovels. When Marilyn, draped in a dirty tablecloth in place of a bath towel, finds the handsome Montenegro showering and meaningful looks begin passing between them, Makavejev undercuts the scene with the cackling of chickens wandering around the distillery room rendezvous. Meanwhile, back in the antiseptic family mansion, Cookie the daughter has taken over for missing mommy, and is delivering breakfast to her "two men" with sinister precision. . . .

Makavejev's films invite, indeed demand, a political-psychological reading: they demand it by "not making sense" in any other way. Even though much of *Montenegro* is fairly straightforward by comparison with recent Makavejev works, we are compelled to ask what it *means* that Marilyn apparently kills her Yugoslav lover and then, returning smilingly to the family table (augmented now by the psychiatrist) poisons them all. We know from the clownish portrayal of the psychiatrist that Makavejev has little use for traditional psychological explanations; the shrink's only contribution to our understanding of Marilyn is to remark that she has nice legs.

There has been a consistent association of sex and murder in Makavejev's films. In *WR* the visiting Soviet skating champion slices off Milena's head with his skate blades after finally giving in to her sexual-political importunings. (Her head, of course, refuses to be silenced.) In *Sweet Movie*, Anna Planeta plunges her dagger into the sailor from the *Potemkin* after

making love to him on a mound of capitalist sugar: a crime that doubtless falls into the diminished-capacity-defense category. And back in *Love Affair of a Switchboard Operator*, the unhappy rat catcher murders his blonde love in an access of sexual jealousy. Now, in *Montenegro*, it appears that when Marilyn becomes sexually liberated she also becomes homicidal. What is going on here? What would Reich say about it?

Makavejev would probably argue that the above way of putting things confuses causes and effects; in the psyche, causal relationships do not really exist. Moreover, from a Reichian point of view, no breakthrough in character-armor is simple or complete; it may also lead to distortions and perversions, given personal histories and social pressures. Sex is not the cause of the murders but only the occasion; that is, the process which breaks the heroine out of her previous stasis also enables her to act on *other* motives—in particular, political ones connected with the oppression of women. Marilyn, this line of thought would explain, poisons her family (and the psychiatrist) because her new freedom enables her to see that in some sense they deserve it; the bourgeois-trap family deserves to die.

This is a feeling which, needless to say, most audiences are hardly prepared to welcome if delivered straight. But we are dealing with a fairly expensive film, aimed at re-establishing its director's commercial viability. In Shavian fashion, therefore, such notions must be couched as afterthoughts in a comedy. Moreover, Makavejev usually provides foils surrounding the sex-murder nexus which question or counter it. In *WR*, Milena's roommate joyfully scrambles around their apartment with her partner, plainly enjoying sex in a healthy and nonhomicidal way. In *Sweet Movie*, one gathers that the commune members' therapeutic regressions enable them to live sexually rich lives, despite the traumatic effects they have upon Miss Universe.

Makavejev was genial and articulate when interviewed for *Film Quarterly* some years ago (see *FQ*, Winter 1971-72). So, having heard he was in New York, I decided to phone and ask if he would throw some light on these questions. I was probably not the first to ask, and he was charmingly evasive. We talked about the earlier films, and he pointed out that even in *Love Affair* the status of the murder is

undermined by an unexplainable last shot of the two principal characters, both still alive. In *Sweet Movie* the apparently slaughtered children wake up. And Milena keeps talking. Makavejev seems to regard puzzlement of the audience by such conflicting imagery as a productive artistic strategy. Besides, he is willing to defend playfully some things that he half considers "mistakes"—signs that the artist is, after all, "an irrational being" (just like the spectator, I would add). As for the ending of *Montenegro*, Makavejev says that the whole film, or at least most of it, may be the wife's fantasy—presumably "opened" by the initial scene on the little pier, to which the camera returns just before the last scene, as if to suggest she has been there all the time, and may remain there as the final events unreel in her mind. The Zanzibar has been left in disarray behind her; Montenegro is dead. What was needed, says Makavejev, was some kind of "catastrophe," which need not be specified in realist detail. (There is also a later flash-shot behind the bars. . . .) To cap it all off, Makavejev adds that after all "in movies nobody ever really dies." And how do we know the fruit was really poisoned, or even that the film is "based on a real incident"? (Titles too can lie.)

This leaves us, obviously, pretty much on our own—which is where Makavejev wants his audience to be. (The spectator, he observes, "keeps the 'liveliest' moments in mind," and doubtless lets far weirder things slip by unchallenged.) Makavejev remains a disconcerting artist because his view of human nature is basically unsafe; he offers no consoling "understandings." In *Man Is Not a Bird* (the story of an over-achieving engineer who gets the prize but loses the blonde) he combined a dark humor and a droll realism. *Love Affair* was still an acceptably realist story, but its touches of strangeness were more unsettling. In succeeding films Makavejev moved to and perhaps beyond the margins of audience tolerance for emotional irruptions through the surface of everyday life. Now he seems to be moving back, toward the style of the earlier films. But still, as the only surviving feature-director heir of the surrealists and Buñuel, he reminds us that the human passions which lie beneath the slick bureaucratized surface of contemporary life are as turbulent and unpredictable as they were in *L'Age d'or*.

—ERNEST CALLENBACH

TAPS

Directed by Harold Becker. Script: Darryl Ponicsan. Photography: Owen Roizman.

Taps is about what can happen when idealism and pragmatism, both in questionable forms, collide. Once the trustees of venerable Bunker Hill Military Academy, which has turned out cadets for 141 years, order it sold for land development, its aging rector, General Harlan Bache (George C. Scott), a career officer who worships the traditions of the school and military life, tries to fight the decision. But after his pistol kills a local boy during a mishap and police take him away, his cadets gather rifles, grenades and machine guns from the armory and seize control of the grounds. Led by Cadet Major Brian Moreland (Timothy Hutton), they resolve to hold the place against a phalanx of cops and National Guardsmen until the authorities agree to reconsider the sale. A Guard colonel (Ronny Cox), fearful of carnage, tries to reason Moreland out of his stand. But, imbued with Bache's credo ("Burglarproof, weatherproof, foolproof, one hundred proof Honor") and worshipping him like a foster father, Moreland misunderstands the difference between an ideal in the capital letter abstract and an ideal operating in the world at large—and pays with his life. The poles of the movie are the boys' quixotic, unreasonable yet stirring love for their school and the practicality of the world outside its gates, where "the numbers" outweigh intangibles. Never cartooning either side of the conflict, blessed with a beautifully articulated dramatic screenplay (Darryl Ponicsan, who did the final version, has also written military novels, *The Last Detail* and *Cinderella Liberty*, scripting the movie version of the second), stately cinematography by Owen Roizman, and meticulously forceful direction by Harold Becker (*The Ragman's Daughter*, *The Onion Field*, *The Black Marble*) *Taps* is an entirely traditional but thoroughly engrossing picture which should need little defending.

Yet it does, because most prominent reviews thus far have been extremely narrow-minded about it, probably because of automatic bad feelings about anything military. The assumption has been that a movie about soldiers, if it is not an exposé of uniformed psychotics or a cutesy romp like *Private Benjamin* or *Stripes*